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AUTHOR Juhnke, Gerald A.; Charkow, Wendy B.; Jordan, Joe; Curtis, Russell C.; Liles, Robin G.; Gmutza, Brian M.; Adams, Jennifer R.

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ABSTRACT

Although student school shootings of students have recently gained significant national attention, more routine forms of student violence (e.g. homicide, rape, aggravated assault, etc.) continue to plague our nation's schools and streets. These less sensational but equally harmful violent behaviors warrant appropriate response. This digest describes the importance of assessment and diagnosis with potentially violent and violent students. Students with the potential for violence usually present a number of common risk factors. These risks are: violent drawings or writings, threats of violence towards others; past violent behaviors or aggressive history; animal torturing; recent relationship break; isolation; teased or perceptions of being teased, harassed, or "picked on;" inappropriate use or access to firearms; substance abuse; familial stressors; noted by peers as being "different;" and low school interest. The 13 risk factors will not identify every violent students, but they can be readily used by school counselors and other mental health professionals as an aid in assessing students at risk of violence. (Contains 5 references.) (MKA)

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Gerald A. Juhnke
Wendy B. Charkow
Joe Jordan
Russell C. Curtis
Robin G. Liles
Brian M. Gmutza
Jennifer R. Adams

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Assessing Potentially Violent Students

Gerald A. Juhnke, Wendy B. Charkow, Joe Jordan, Russell C. Curtis, Robin G. Liles
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Overview

Although student school shootings of students have recently gained significant national attention, more routine forms of student violence (e.g., homicide, rape, aggravated assault, etc.) continue to plague our nation's schools and streets. These less sensational but equally harmful violent behaviors warrant appropriate response. This digest describes the importance of assessment and diagnosis with potentially violent and violent students.

Assessing Potentially Violent and Violent Students

Firearm homicide rates for youth ages 15 to 19 increased 155% between 1987 and 1994 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention/National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 1996); and homicide arrest rates for youth ages 14 to 17 increased 41% between 1989 and 1994 (Fox, 1996). The most recent Violent Offense Arrests Reports published by the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) indicate that 37,323 children ages 14 and under, and 86,130 adolescents ages 15 to 17 were arrested in 1997 for committing severe acts of violence (e.g., homicide, aggravated assault, rape) (United States Bureau of Justice, 1999). Garbarino (1999) reports approximately 10% of the 23,000 annual homicides in the United States are committed by persons under age 18. Such data clearly demonstrates the need to recognize high-risk factors which correspond to potentially violent students.

High-Risk Factors

Adequate assessment is vital to the counseling process and critical to the establishment of pertinent treatment goals and objectives. This is especially true when counseling potentially violent and violent students. These students typically present a number of common risk factors (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998) which can be readily identified via a clinical interview process (Supervisory Special Agent Eugene A. Rugala, personal communication, August 31, 1998). These high-risk factors are indicated below with a brief summary suggesting their reason for inclusion.

Violent Drawings or Writings. Violent students often indicate their intentions before acting violently via drawings or writings. Counselors learning of such violent drawings or writings should not easily dismiss such violent expressions. Violent poems, letters to friends, or letters to the intended victim are clear indications of violent potential. Hence, further assessment is warranted whenever a student uses age inappropriate violent drawings or writings.

Threats of Violence Towards Others. Any threat of violence towards others should be immediately assessed and appropriate intervention actions should be taken to insure safety. Direct threats such as, "I'm going to kill him" as well as veiled threats such as, "Something big is going to happen to you after school" clearly are inappropriate and warrant immediate assessment and intervention. Threats should be assessed for: (a) lethality, (b) the degree to which a violent plan exists, and (c) the student's ability to secure the indicated weapon or harm instrument (e.g., poison, automobile). Any threat indicated by a student which is realistic, well planned, and highly lethal should be considered viable.

Past Violent Behaviors or Aggressive History. Students who have been violent in the past or have demonstrated aggressive behaviors towards others are at greater risk of repeating such behaviors. Thus, these students are noted as being at greater risk for future violent behaviors.

Animal Torturing. There exists a high correlation between students who torture animals and violence. Students who regularly torture animals or intentionally inflict harm upon animals should be assessed for violent ideation towards others.

Recent Relationship Break. Students who have recently experienced a relationship break (e.g., being jilted by a girlfriend or best friend) have an increased likelihood of being violent.

Isolation. The vast majority of students who isolate themselves from peers or who appear friendless typically are not violent. However, one high-risk factor which has been strongly correlated with violent behaviors towards school peers is isolation. For this reason, students isolating themselves or reporting feelings of being isolated from others should be considered at greater risk.

Teased or Perceptions of Being Teased, Harassed, or "Picked On". Violent students often have a hypersensitivity toward criticism. These students report perceptions of being teased, harassed or being picked on by those they were violent toward.Therefore, students indicating feelings that they are being teased, harassed, or "picked on" should be assessed to determine whether or not they either intend to harm or fantasize about harming others.

Social Withdrawal. Withdrawal from peers and familial supports can indicate the student is experiencing any of a number of concerns (e.g., depression, helplessness) which warrant

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assessment and intervention. When combined with other risk factors, social withdrawal may signal potential violence toward others.

Inappropriate Use or Access to Firearms. Students who inappropriately use firearms by shooting at people, homes, or vehicles or have improper, unsupervised firearm access have a clear potential to harm others and act violently. No student should be allowed to posses a gun or weapon on school property or at school-related functions (e.g., dances, sporting events, etc.). Given the general impulsiveness of students and the dangers of immediate access to lethal weapons, this factor is one of the most important which should be assessed.

Substance Abuse. Although substance abuse does not cause students to be violent, students under the influence of psychoactive substances often fail to think logically and experience increased impulsivity. Thus, there exists a strong correlation between substance abuse and violent behaviors.

Familial Stressors. Familial stressors can engender feelings of frustration, anger, and hopelessness among students as well as adults.

Noted by Peers as Being "Different". On many occasions after student violence, peers and others will note that the perpetrating student was labeled as being "different" from peers or being associated with some group. Hence, students frequently labeled by peers as being "weird", "strange", "geeky", etc. may be at increased risk for violent behaviors.

Low School Interest. The genesis of this risk factor could come from any of a multitude of reasons which by themselves may not evoke violent behaviors. However, in combination with other possible violence related risk factors noted within this scale, students presenting with low school interest may have an inability to perform as well as they desire to and may feel frustrated by such inability. Additionally, these students may perceive themselves as belittled by those performing more favorably. Thus, when challenged to increase performance or when feeling harassed by those performing at higher levels, these students may become violent. For these reasons, this factor has been included.

Assessment Guidelines

Some of the above noted individual risk factors warrant immediate attention even if other risk factors are not present and the student is not perceived as violent. For example, any student experiencing symptomatology resulting from substance abuse or dependence warrants immediate treatment. Additionally, students inappropriately using firearms pose a significant danger to others and warrant intervention as well. Furthermore, any student making violent threats towards others should be required to complete a psychological assessment process and parental conferencing. Although these steps will not prevent all forms of violence from students threatening violent behaviors, they are a means to provide a reasonable safety standard and undoubtedly will help insulate the counselor and school system from potential liability.

Other individual risk factors are unlikely to identify potentially violent students. These risk factors by themselves without the presence of other noted risk factors have a high probability of providing false positive evaluations. Here, for example, single risk factors such as Low School Interest or Noted by Peers as Being "Different" would incorrectly identify many nonviolent students as having significant potential for violence.

Instead, counselors, teachers, and mental health professionals within the schools should look for multiple high-risk factors. Thus, a student who indicates: (a) low school interest, (b) feelings of being isolated, (c) a recent significant relationship break, and (d) specific verbal threats towards a peer, should be considered at risk and minimally warrants a thoroughly assessment with a planned intervention. A student with an abundance of the 13 identified risk factors suggests someone experiencing significant environmental turmoil and emotional stressors. These students are at significant risk of violence towards peers and are unlikely to function adequately without direct intervention. Those at this extreme end of the risk continuum warrant immediate removal from the general school environment and a structured living environment (e.g., specialized foster care, group home, inpatient psychiatric hospital, etc.) to insure safety to peers and self. Parents should be contacted and a formal evaluation for a structured living and learning environment should occur when an abundance of the risk factors are noted. Should the student be deemed an immediate danger to self or others and the parents be unwilling to appropriately support evaluation for a more structured living and learning environment, child protective services should likely be notified. In many cases child protective services can intervene to insure the child is placed in a safe environment until the immediate danger to self or others disappears.

Summary

Student violence is a very real danger. Undoubtedly, these 13 risk factors by themselves will not identify every violent student. However, the risk factors can be readily used by school counselors and other school mental health professionals as an aid in assessing students at risk of violence.

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